

Rethinking (Non)Nativeness among English-Speaking Teachers in Vietnam

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Abstract: In Vietnam, language teaching and learning have recently been a concern of not only educators and language learners but also parents and families who have school-aged children. When finding a suitable language course, language learners and their families tend to ask questions about the nativeness of the teachers and their language fluency. Being a native speaker has become an advantage for language teachers. Their actual proficiency and educational qualifications may come in second place. This situation may lead to poorly qualified language teaching courses and unequal treatment of qualified non-native language-speaking teachers. To confront this problem, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has tightened the job entrance requirements for foreign English-speaking teachers, especially those who apply for work as English lecturers at university. It is identity and qualifications that matter. This literature review reflects on the ambivalent approach by the MOET to recruiting qualified human capacity building for the national English development project and developing and retaining English-speaking Vietnamese lecturers. This paper argues that the influence of monolingual ideologies in language teaching and learning in Vietnam that was once encountered at schools and universities some years ago has now shifted to a more open but competitive ambiance for national integration into the global market. In this sense, teaching English is not an apolitical activity. It is a politically designated career in this socialist market-oriented economy.

Keywords: Teaching English, Monolingual ideologies, Nativeness, Identity, Power

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Introduction

The appearance and use of foreign languages in Vietnam have been reflective of colonization and social transformations. During the feudal time and under the Chinese invasion, the Chinese language was used in Vietnamese society. By the 16th century, British merchants alongside other European ones came to this country for some international trading (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020). Such languages as Portuguese, Italian, and English were brought to Vietnam, but none of them thrived because the ruling kings continuously rejected foreigners. Later arrivals included Christian missionaries from European colonizing countries who, together with the

invasion of the then-French Government, brought their foreign languages to Vietnam. French was taught to the elite population and used in formal contexts. It was one of the many ways that the French used to dominate the colonized people's mindset about France as the Mother Country (Nguyen, 2013). After 1954, the US entered Vietnam, leading to the Vietnam War, which divided the country into two. The South of Vietnam, which was US-backed, adopted English in formal communication, education, and work. The North of Vietnam did not appreciate the position of the English language. Instead, Russian was taught at many schools and colleges as Vietnam gravitated against Russia (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020). However, since 2000, when Vietnam began to diversify its international relations with countries outside the former communist block for its deeper integration into the global market (Nguyen, 2021), English has been taught at many schools, colleges, and universities as the compulsory subject, as well as at foreign language centers. The promotion of this language is seen as a human capacity-building strategy. Other foreign languages such as Japanese, Chinese, French, German, Korean, and Spanish are also taught, but they are not compulsory subjects at schools.

Recruiting teachers to teach these foreign languages has historically come from several sources: native speakers, local teachers who are trained at domestic institutions or graduate from abroad, and even sporadic native speaker travelers. In Vietnam, selecting a foreign language to learn and the kinds of speaker-teachers to learn with may not always be a personal choice. Neither is teaching foreign languages. Unlike teaching other subjects, the practice of English in Vietnam is likely to be related to teachers' identity and negotiations of power between parents/students and teachers, employers and teachers (Bright & Phan, 2011), as well as foreign teachers and the government under social transformations. It is also the desire of the government to select and use English foreign teachers. For foreigners, teaching English is a politically designated career in Vietnam. This is the first argument that this paper aims to unpack.

According to Jenkins (2009), Vietnam belongs to the expanding circle of the English language. This term, which is suggested by Kachru (1990), refers to the countries where the English language is considered a foreign language (EFL). EFL in Vietnam plays a little governmental role, but it is the Vietnamese Government's objective to spread it as a means of international integration. English is a useful means for communication purposes, but English language teaching seems to be a controversial topic. Shuck (2006) believes that language and identity are interlinked through the self and the other (see also Bright & Phan, 2011). The self can refer to native speakers who see themselves or are seen as norms and who are seen as unproblematic. The other can refer to learners who aspire to learn the correct norms and standards produced by native-speaking teachers together with the use of Western technology in the classroom (Bright & Phan, 2011). The norms of native-speaking teachers are then associated with monolingual ideologies. These ideologies are now being challenged in Vietnam as some native English or foreign English-speaking teachers are found to be problematic. This is another argument formed in this paper.

These two arguments are interchangeably presented in several parts of this paper. The first one discloses the interlink between nativeness, identity, monolingual ideologies, and qualifications. This part is followed by a discussion on the politics of monolingual ideologies and their influences on English teaching. These theoretical

parts are examined in the case of Vietnam's recent dual efforts in improving the quantity and quality of foreign English teachers that exacerbate some ambiguity in their teaching career. While previous studies (e.g. Bright & Phan, 2011; Kharis *et al.*, 2020; Manh *et al.*, 2017; Shuck, 2006; Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020) acknowledged that native English-speaking teachers are less likely to face difficulties in applying for English teaching jobs in Asia and Vietnam, the arguments in this paper, on the one hand, are congruent with this commonplace view in some ways but on the other hand, challenge it. The major contribution that these arguments infer in this paper can be found in the new way for policy-makers and researchers to rethink the relationships between teacher identity and social transformations rather than the mere relationships between teacher identity and students' appreciation of and preference for monolingual ideologies.

The interlink between nativeness, identity, monolingual ideologies, and qualifications

Linguistic ideologies that are embedded in teaching can be (and used to be) a means of colonialism (Canagarajah, 1999). As colonizers, native speakers are seen as the correct conveyors of the grammar, vocabulary, accent, pronunciation, and style of that language. Nativeness, in this sense, is the norm. Their speakers are unproblematic and stable Cook (1999). Many previous studies (e.g. Bright & Phan, 2011; Cook, 1999; Joseph & Ramani, 2006; Kharis *et al.*, 2020; Manh *et al.*, 2017; Shuck, 2006; Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020) found native language models are preferred in non-native contexts. Students may prefer to study the English language with native English teachers rather than with non-native English-speaking teachers. This phenomenon leads to an unfavorable situation for the latter. Why wouldn't one want to speak English like an English person authentically?

However, Jenkins (2009) and Kramsch and Whiteside (2007) have collectively argued that the definition and the use of the term nativeness may not be appropriate in the contexts in which English is regarded as a lingua franca. In this part, the authors argue that while debates about nativeness and non-nativeness have flooded the current body of research on language and education (as shown in the above paragraph), the concepts are linked to identity. Normally, a native speaker is one who acquires the language either at birth or after many years of acquisition before he or she turns puberty. In contrast, people who speak a language as a second or foreign language are seen as non-native speakers (Cook, 1999). What if a Vietnamese person was born in the US with American citizenship and has lived there for years and speaks English as the mother tongue? He or she looks exactly like Vietnamese people, and then is he or she favored to teach English in Vietnam compared with Americans who are white? Linguistically and legally, yes.

But the authors' experiences as the managers of English language departments at some universities indicate that white people are more prioritized as students and parents still think white people speak English more authentically (for more evidence, see Bright & Phan, 2011; Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020). Many Filipino teachers have flown to Vietnam to teach English as the demand for native (or native-like) English teachers is soaring. Their English shows some heritage of a colonized language. The MOET requires them to sit for a Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) test, at the minimum expected grade of Level 5 (Government, 2018,

2020, & 2023), but their salaries can be twice or three times higher than those Vietnamese teachers can be entitled to have. This score is the same as Vietnamese teachers teaching English at the high school and university levels. What is the difference? The former are foreigners! Have you ever seen an American speak Vietnamese fluently, but local people tend to speak English (though at a very humble level) back to him? Probably, the very popular Youtuber Trần Luân Vũ (or Joshua Ryan in his American name, who has his own Youtube channel) is a typical example of this paradox. He is a 100% American who learned Vietnamese in the US before going to Vietnam to work as a freelance English teacher. His videos show many situations like this. Identity is not necessarily constructed by speakers themselves, but also by others' beliefs and recognition of who they are. In other words, nativeness matters, but identity matters too. The two are intertwined.

Further, nativeness and identity are linked to monolingual ideologies. Language ideologies, in general, refer to individual beliefs about the rationalization and justification of language use (Bacon, 2018). These beliefs are formed by both native speakers and non-native speakers of that language. In this sense, monolingualism is recognized as the ability to use a language as the mother tongue which is recognized by the native speakers of that language community. However, the assumption that native speakers are monolingual seems to be inappropriate. Due to immigration and globalization, monolingual and mono-cultural communities tend to become rarer (Bacon, 2018). Recently, the number of societies where all people speak the same languages and share the same cultures has been reduced (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007). People may be monolingual when they are young, but they may learn another language at home or at school. The need to learn languages besides mother tongues is increasing. Most schools around the world tend to have at least one second or one foreign language subject. Also, Kramsch and Whiteside (2007) claim that there are more and more people who learn languages that are not their first and only language and are able to use those languages at various proficiency levels. Thus, the identity of monolingual NS tends to change when people learn other languages. As such, recognizing a person as a monolingual native speaker of a language is often misleading.

But the assumption of native English speakers remains true in Vietnamese EFL contexts, where parents and students trust the ability of a white speaker to speak correct and standard English as a norm. The government distrusts non-white foreigners who teach English by asking them to sit for a CEFR test. In fact, Circular 21/2018/TT-BGDDT and Decree 152/2020/NĐ-CP (Government, 2018 & 2020) dictate English foreign teachers who are not native speakers to obtain the C1 level to meet one of the requirements for a work permit in Vietnam. They are also asked to possess at least a college degree to teach at foreign language centers, a bachelor's degree at the upper secondary school level and lower, and a master's degree at the university level. The negotiated salary (usually higher than local teachers, see Bright & Phan, 2011) can be an attraction, but would that deserve to be the main driving force for those who are very qualified for decent jobs in their own countries to relocate to an exotic place?

Another aspect that influences the interlink between nativeness, identity, and monolingualism is qualification. Being a native speaker of a language does not always mean that person can teach it. Teaching is a science that requires people to attend formal training programs that consist of various modules. A program in education,

teaching, Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL)/Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), English/American literature, or linguistics is constituted by courses on professional skills, foundational knowledge, professional knowledge, and electives. These blocks of knowledge and skills allow teacher students to familiarize themselves with educational environments, as well as understand students' psychology and physiology, educational policies, and challenges. They also equip them with expertise in the English language and teaching methodologies. Qualifications may include teachers' positive and open attitudes towards differences that emerge from multicultural contexts or social biases (Bright & Phan, 2011). They also encompass teachers' adaptability and flexibility in suiting their teaching styles and attitudes to meet communities' and students' needs. Respect for differences is vital. These qualifications are not simply accumulated by native teachers themselves. They are measured, justified, examined, and even tried by the universities where they have studied, students, parents, employers, and communities. In this sense, being a qualified native English teacher is not a personal choice or a separate domain of being native biologically and linguistically. It is an interrelated effect of decisions and choices made by many agents.

The power of nativeness in monolingual ideologies

No matter how struggling the job application processes can be, foreign and native English-speaking teachers can still find ways to arrive in countries that need English for their economic growth. Monolingual ideologies are reflective of several personal, economic, educational, and social orientations. The authors of this paper further argue that these orientations are concerted, creating both friction and the possibility for monolingual ideologies to manifest themselves in practice that can be considered as the working politics of monolingualism. For instance, on the personal level, opportunities for learning, experiencing, making a living, extending professional and social lives, and challenging themselves enable them to spend some time (some even prolong more than initial intentions) working in new countries. They still have an advantage that non-native teachers do not have: being native. Their being native is supposed to be a reflection of a monolingual capability that defeats non-native speakers' deviations in language use. The thirst for using the correct language emerges in non-English speaking countries and communities, and these social and educational demands enable their nativeness to excel. Vietnam, for example, was ranked in the last position in the league of 60 countries with moderate proficiency (English Proficiency Index, 2022). When the country is in the industrialization and modernization process, a highly skilled workforce who can speak foreign languages confidently, correctly, and effectively is always needed (Nguyen, 2021). As a consequence, demands for native (and even native-like) English teachers are high.

However, Vietnamese society is not an English-speaking country. Learners find it extremely hard to interact with others for fluency and language development outside the classroom. They lack a communicative environment that is supportive of their language practice and learning (Edmett, Donaghy, & Tysoe, 2021). Learning with foreign teachers, no matter what qualifications they have, is always favored. Let's think about the colonized Singapore back in the early to mid-20th century, when foreign teachers might have come from India, Ceylon, or European countries. Singaporean students might have needed some standards to follow and an English communicative environment for daily exchanges. It took generations for Singapore to turn English from

a lingua franca that connected diverse ethnic groups to one of the official languages. In some way (though this can be an exaggeration or presupposition), the lack of some colonialization heritage may pose an advantage for foreign identities and supposed language competence to rise.

In addition, monolingual ideologies may approach ESL/EFL learners in various ways including the materials used for teaching and learning. Phan (2008) notes that teaching and learning materials and examination frameworks published by the native English-speaking countries seem to indicate that their English varieties and pedagogies are global models and other varieties are used merely in minor communities. Thus, this assumption seems to be a product of the monolingual imperialism of the source (L1) countries. Many people have this assumption and conclude that traditional teaching in their countries is disadvantageous compared to foreign pedagogies. Perceptions created, spread, and determined by the countries from which teaching materials are distributed seem to have a significant influence on pedagogies in general (Canagarajah, 1999). In other words, a great number of teaching and learning materials in ESL/EFL countries are published by L1 countries which are assumed to own the standard varieties of English. EFL teaching in Vietnam is not an exception to this reality.

Many educational institutions and universities in Vietnam are using foreign pedagogical models and foreign published materials from L1 countries, especially from the United States and the United Kingdom. For example, from 2008 to 2012, the materials which were used by our university for English major students were the series of Interaction and Mosaic published by McGraw Hill, an American educational company. Also, Top Notch and Summit series from Pearson, a media company founded in the United Kingdom, are used in teaching and learning the preparation English courses at the university where the authors are working. Teachers, students, and parents seem to take that phenomenon for granted and never ask why foreign methods and materials are used instead of domestic materials and traditional pedagogies. Curriculum developers at universities may explain that non-native teachers/lecturers may not possess the correct and standard use of the English language, thus producing a textbook can cause some disadvantages If it is reviewed by native experts in the field, it certainly takes time and financial resources.

Another reason is that non-native teachers/lecturers/textbook writers may compile their materials from publications produced by native experts. The tasks of writing a textbook may not be original. Also, using textbooks written by well-known native authors and published by prestigious publishers can even help marketize the universities' brand during the student recruitment process. Nevertheless, this is not the case for elite universities in Vietnam which are able to recruit and train very well-known lecturers in Vietnam and abroad. But overall, as Canagarajah (1999) has noted, ideologies and cultures which could be foreign to language learners may be deeply embodied in the English language. The practices of foreign methods and the use of foreign materials may be related to the economic and educational prestige of those native English-speaking countries.

Monolingualism is also exacerbated by social prejudice. In Vietnam, there is a stereotype that Western countries are the best place in the world (see Bright & Phan, 2011; Kharis *et al.*, 2020). Those countries are considered

“heaven” by many Vietnamese people because most of those countries have strong economic status and prestigious educational systems (Nguyen, 2014). Their cultures and language varieties are assumed to be elite, and their educational systems are believed to be among the most prestigious. As a result, language users and learners tend to prefer native models rather than local models. Many Vietnamese speakers of English are also found to consider the native speaker as the correct standard for them to follow in oral and written communication (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020). Young Vietnamese people like to code-switch and code-mix English in their daily conversations as a sign of being fluent, elite, and educated (Ha, 2022). Walkinshaw and Duong (2012) claim that, in the EFL teaching context of Vietnam, there may be a bias towards non-native English teachers due to the imperialism of the L1 countries. As stated above, many English educational materials and methodologies which are sponsored by the L1 countries are applied in ESL/EFL education. Those materials and methodologies seem to enforce the importance of native English teachers. Many people thus believe that native English teachers are able to teach more effectively than their non-native counterparts (Bright & Phan, 2011; Cook, 1999; Phan, 2008; Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020).

The imperialism of nativeness could be reflected in the world rankings of Western universities, international English examinations, and ESL/EFL teacher training programs in the L1 countries. The Quacquarelli Symonds (the United Kingdom, Times Higher Education (the United Kingdom), or Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (China) have continuously highlighted the very top rankings of American, British, and Australian higher institutions, making these countries the top study destinations for talented students, or second chance students who have failed the national university entrance examinations in Vietnam but can secure financial support from their relatives’ income (Nguyen, 2013 & 2014). Domestic universities in Vietnam look up to these universities, trying to advance themselves to the league of the top 1,000 or 2,000 (Nguyen, 2021). Presumably speaking, Western countries and their universities are the best, and their lecturers are also the top of the top! Learning with and from people who come from these countries can (mistakenly) benefit learners who cannot afford a language study trip overseas. English teachers with degrees conferred by Vietnamese universities are not given a fair chance to apply for teaching jobs. Many advertisements for lecturer recruitment at the university level or even famous English language centers in Vietnam explicitly prioritize those who have graduated from overseas, though the word overseas (“nước ngoài”) may mean every country! They are disadvantaged. The influence of monolingual ideologies may also be the reason why students in ESL/EFL countries choose a course in an L1 country instead of equivalent courses in their countries despite the high cost of studying abroad.

According to Canagarajah (1999), the L1 countries are famous for training educators. A certificate or degree from those countries may benefit people who hold it in EFL-speaking countries such as Vietnam. International English proficiency test scores are one of the requirements for non-native people to meet when they apply for studies, work, or immigration in English-speaking countries. They are also used for social and professional advancement in their home countries. These examinations are organized by famous English-speaking syndicates such as Cambridge Assessment English, British Council, Pearson, Educational Testing Service, or Duolingo English Test. Some Vietnamese universities give a bonus of three marks in their entrance examinations or

exempt them from taking English preparation courses after enrollment to students who have an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score higher than 5.0 (*VnExpress*, 2023). Although some non-English-speaking countries have developed their own English testing systems to meet the local demands for English test scores for education and work, these testing organizations have the ruling power in these emergent markets. English native teachers who are qualified to teach the preparation courses for these tests are mostly favored.

These biases cause misjudgments of students or non-native English teachers about their own language proficiency. They may also discourage students to claim their authority over their language varieties. Seidlhofer (2001) argues that, due to the definition of the term native speaker, non-native speakers are not able to be native speakers of a language despite their proficiency in that language. The monolingual ideologies may cause ESL/EFL users and students to think that they have no power over the English language and that their language varieties are non-mainstream. Further, Kirkpatrick (2007) notes that, due to the high need for native English teachers, nativeness tends to become the only requirement for teacher recruitment in many countries, and thus many teachers without professional training are recruited. One of the authors of this paper observed that situation when she searched for a part-time teaching job after graduation from a university in Vietnam. When she worked in an English language center in Vietnam, she found that her co-worker who was a native speaker did not have a higher educational degree or any qualification in education. Most foreign language centers where she submitted her job applications asked for a teaching diploma. In contrast, many foreigners who worked there only graduated from high schools and did not have any professional training in teaching. Some of these foreigners were Filipinos and Germans! Their salaries were about three times higher than those of local non-native English teachers. Normally, Vietnamese-speaking teachers are put in a lower rank compared to non-native English teachers no matter how well they are trained and experienced (Cao, 2009).

The power of non-nativeness in bilingual ideologies

This section argues that non-nativeness can also speak in several ways compared to nativeness in relation to bilingual ideologies. First, unfair prejudices towards native (native-like or foreign) and non-native English teachers seem to be inappropriate. Native-speaker models may not always be an advantage for language learners. The proficiency of native teachers which seems to be unattainable to students may overwhelm them. Actually, if students find these models too difficult to achieve, they may be unmotivated and discouraged to study (Cook, 1999). In contrast, non-native teachers may be found to be more achievable and efficient for students. Some non-native English teachers in Vietnam, for example, can speak English, and Vietnamese as their mother tongue, as well as use at least another foreign language at least at the survival level such as French, Chinese, or Japanese, to name but a few. Vietnamese teachers who teach English in schools located in ethnic minority communities can even pick up the local languages such as Cambodian or H'Mong to communicate with students and parents at the social level. The university programs in English Education (Sư phạm tiếng Anh) or English Language (Ngôn ngữ Anh) include courses on second foreign languages (e.g. *VNU Hanoi-University*

of *Languages and International Studies*, 2023). The ability to use more than one foreign language allows these teachers to understand the foreign language learning process and mechanism and to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between English and the second foreign language they know so they can better create and devise teaching strategies that can best fit their students' learning styles and education system. Native or foreign English teachers may also know several foreign languages, but the way they have learned is fitted in their countries' education systems.

Second, managerial roles at domestic institutions in Vietnam are often played by Vietnamese teachers/lecturers because of several reasons. Managers at departmental levels in public schools, colleges, and universities must be full-time faculty, have at least a master's degree and a doctoral degree at the university level, be a Communist Party member who can lead the team in accordance with the one-party political system and mandates, and have some years of teaching experience (Government, 2014). Being a Communist Party member hardly becomes a reality for native or foreign teachers. Most foreign teachers have fixed-term work contracts. Although some are employed as full-time members, they are required to extend their visas and work permits, and this process is cumbersome. Non-native local teachers do not have to go through this process. Also, understanding students' motivations, being to communicate with communities, and attending to the authorities' requests are more suitable for local managers than foreign ones. In addition, native or foreign English teachers/lecturers are normally assigned to teach and supervise speaking tests and examinations. Final examination questions are usually created by local non-native English teachers who know exactly what the requirements and meanings of the tests and examinations are. In this vein, foreign or native English teachers seem to lose their race.

Third, non-English-speaking teachers who share the same culture as EFL learners do not seem to encounter teaching problems caused by cultural differences. In contrast, cultural distances may be a challenge for native or foreign teachers in teaching ESL/EFL learners. Actually, cultural differences are quite common in classrooms where teachers are foreigners. According to Walkinshaw and Duong (2012), misunderstandings between foreign teachers and Vietnamese students may occur because native English teachers do not seem to have as much knowledge of Vietnamese culture as students do. Cultural differences may negatively influence the teaching process and limit the achievements of students. For example, one of the authors experienced cultural distances between the lecturers and foreign ESL students when she studied English at Melbourne University in Australia. One of the lecturers did not seem to understand the students' Asian cultures. She complained that she could not stand our silence when she asked questions. This situation caused tension between her and us. Most students in Asian countries tend to remain silent when they are asked a question in general and the teacher does not choose a specific individual to answer it. Students will answer if they are chosen and asked in particular by the teacher. We, who were from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Vietnam, seemed to share the same cultural ideology in class about politeness. Our perspectives were different from our lecturer's. Our lecturer who embraced the western perspective regarded the silence of the students as rude and passive. On the other hand, most of us who were from Asian cultures considered the silence polite and humble. From our perspective, students should remain silent if they do not know the answer or if the question confuses them. Asking questions back to teachers is not quite common in our cultures. Because of the tension caused by the cultural differences between us and

our lecturer, the lesson was interrupted. The lecturer was disappointed, so she had to stop teaching to ask the students the reason why they remained silent in her class. In this sense, cultural distances may prevent the efficiency of teaching and learning. Being taught by non-native English teachers who share the same culture can provide students with an important benefit which is able to prevent misunderstanding of cultural ideologies. Sharing the same cultural perspectives, teachers and students are able to avoid misunderstandings and cultural shocks which may negatively influence the process of teaching and learning (Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012).

Fourth, because non-native teachers were once EFL students, they may have similar experiences with students while native English teachers may not fully sympathize with them or understand the process of or difficulties in learning a foreign language (Cao, 2003; Seidlhofer, 1999). Besides experiencing challenges, non-native English teachers (including foreign non-native English teachers) know how to acquire English as a foreign language while English natives acquire it as their first language. Non-native teachers are experienced learners of the target language, so they may know how to achieve that language proficiency effectively (Seidlhofer, 1999). They and their students seem to have similar cognitions of the English language learning process because they share similar perspectives on foreign language learning. In contrast, non-native teachers acquire English naturally as their mother tongue since they were born, so the way in which they approach that language seems to be different from the way students do. Their understanding of the English language is the perspective of L1 speakers, and thus their explanations and lectures may confuse students.

Fifth, learning grammar with non-native English teachers may be easier for students. Unlike native teachers who acquire grammar prescriptively, naturally, and routinely, non-native English teachers have to learn it as grammatical knowledge of a foreign language. Most of them are better at teaching grammar and giving commentaries because they have experience in learning English grammar (Cao, 2003; Seidlhofer, 1999). Knowing the mother tongue can help these teachers explain unfamiliar concepts or grammatical points for beginner students to easily understand.

Sixth, the imitation of ideal pronunciation and accents produced by native English teachers is important, but it may not be as important as the efficiency of communication purposes and test scores at schools or universities that focus on grammar and reading. The national upper secondary graduation examination which is created and managed by the MOET consists of stresses, pronunciation, vocabulary in use, social interactions, synonyms and antonyms, grammar, sentence building, and reading comprehension (MOET, 2022). All are in 50 multiple-choice questions. Regular tests and examinations at schools do not consist of listening or speaking parts, and neither does the English examination in the national upper secondary school graduation. Pronunciation can be taught by using pictures and listening to audio. The tests and examinations do include pronunciation checks, but students can learn the phonological rules by heart. Technologies such as English teaching and learning video clips created by both native and non-native English speakers/teachers/organizations, Google Translate, and the like in some sense weaken the position of native English teachers in non-English-speaking countries or communities. Learners may use a variety of accents in their Englishes to communicate as far as they get themselves understood and understand others. In other words, bilingualism challenges the power of

monolingualism in a non-English-speaking learning context.

An ambivalent approach to the bargaining power of (non)nativeness

As Nguyen (2014 & 2017) pointed out, Vietnam during the period after the 2000s saw growing demands for a skilled workforce for its global integration. Accordingly, the demand for speaking English as one of the international languages became stronger. In 2008, the Prime Minister officially promulgated a radical reform in English teaching and learning through the National Foreign Language 2020 project, which aimed to increase both the quantity and quality of English-speaking educated nationals in Vietnam from 2008 to 2020 (Government, 2008). The project (often referred to as the 2020 Project) which was funded US\$500 (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020, p. 698) was carried out in three phases. The first one which lasted from 2008 to 2010 focused on re-writing English textbooks from primary to high school levels. The second phase from 2011 to 2015 aimed to implement the reformed English curricula. Normally, students study 805 hours of English per year (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020). The last phase from 2016 to 2022 increased the intensive use of English at post-secondary levels and higher (Van, 2015). Each was accordingly measured on the scales of the CEFR. The principal purpose was to enable a large section of the young people with knowledge and working skills to speak and use foreign languages (primarily English) "independently and confidently" (Government, 2008, p. 1) for study, work, and communication in an international and multicultural environment when the country was advancing its global integration and developing its knowledge economy. In particular, in 2014, the MOET issued Decision 729/BGDDT, which specified the levels of English for teachers, and some examples of the anticipated outcomes of this scheme in each last level of education are as follows:

Table 1: Expected English Levels for Particular Groups of People and Occupations in Vietnam

| People | Expected English level |
|---|---|
| Primary students (Grades 1-5) (schools in remote areas start teaching English in Grade 3) | A1 |
| Lower secondary students (Grades 6-9) | A2 |
| Upper secondary students (Grades 10-12) | B1 |
| University students | B1 |
| Bachelor and master of English students | C1 |
| Post-graduate students in majors other than English | B1 |
| Doctoral students | B2 |
| Primary and lower secondary teachers of English | B2 |
| Upper secondary teachers of English | C1 |
| University lecturers in English | C2 (but as there was no one of a higher certificate than C2, C1 was acceptable) |
| Medical doctors | B2 |
| Military/Defense officers of a rank higher than Major | B2 |

Not many Vietnamese teachers teaching English, people, or students were able to achieve these expected test results when they sat for Cambridge ESOL. Later in 2014, the MOET issued the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (known as VSTEP), which was indeed a Vietnamese-adjusted version of the CEFR test by Cambridge ESOL. Ambivalent approaches to improving the quantity and quality of English-speaking people in Vietnam have been adopted in achieving this project. For example, English textbooks from primary to high school levels were outsourced to international publishers such as Macmillan Education and Pearson. These textbooks were co-written with local English teachers who were appointed by the MOET. An ambivalent approach was clearly expressed in this collaboration. On the one hand, the MOET expected the quality of these textbooks to be of a correct standard of the authentic English language spoken and used by native speakers. On the other, the MOET wanted to increase localized knowledge that suited the general education system in Vietnam (Van, 2015). This approach is also based on an increasing number of world-renown experts in TESOL who are Vietnamese.

Nevertheless, the outcomes were not as good as intended. In fact, more than 80% of English teachers at state schools failed the requirements (Manh, Nguyen, & Burns, 2017. p. 24). The MOET allowed them to take IELTS or TOEFL as equivalents. Still, these international English proficiency tests seemed to be as hard for many of them. The report by EF Education First (English Proficiency Index, 2022) showed that Vietnam's English Proficiency Index average score was 473/800, continuously placing this country in the low-proficiency category. In 2017, the first phases of the project were said to fail (Manh, Nguyen, & Burns, 2017). The project continued until 2020, the end of its life. But the MOET never stops their ambition: a website for the National Foreign Language project was created and has been well-updated with information about training courses, new regulations related to foreign language education, learning resources, international partnerships, and the like (<https://ngoainguquocgia.moet.gov.vn>).

This paper does not intend to explore or examine the causes of this failure but instead, argues for the ambivalent approach to recruiting native/foreign English teachers. Let's begin by looking at an evaluative report conducted by British Council and commissioned by the MOET (Edmett, Donaghy, & Tysoe, 2021). This report identified three main limitations in the project: shortages of qualified foreign language learning resources, technologies necessary for teaching and learning foreign languages, and a suitable foreign language speaking environment. None of these limitations was found to be related to a lack of native English-speaking teachers. The CEFR and VSTEP, or IELTS always include a speaking test module. Being fluent also requires good use of writing techniques that express fluency like native speakers. Studying with native English teachers is always important, but this project seemed to downgrade the value of this exotic human resource. Another limitation that added to the failure is the shortage of qualified teachers who obtain the expected levels of English. With regard to native or foreign English teachers, before 2019, English teachers from foreign countries submitted their documents to their employers, who submitted these documents together with their request to the province's or city's Department of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs for approval. Since then, all the documents have been sent to the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs for approval. The requirements have also been tightened. Some foreign language centers must shut down their businesses because they cannot recruit qualified

native/foreign English speakers as they promised to parents and students. The authors typed the Vietnamese phrase “trung tâm ngoại ngữ đóng cửa” (“foreign language centers shut down) in the search of the most popular online Vietnamese newspaper *VnExpress*, we found that there are at least 500 foreign language centers had to close their business because of many reasons, one of which is their inability to recruit native teachers that meet the new work permit requirements.

In particular, all foreign language teachers must possess at least a bachelor’s degree related to TESOL or linguistics, or a bachelor’s degree in a related field to teaching plus a TEFL or TESOL 120-hour certificate. At the university level, potential candidates must have at least a master’s degree in TESOL, linguistics, or literature or a master’s degree in a related field to their teaching and a TEFL or TESOL certificate (Vietnam’s Immigration Office, 2022). The only difference among types of native English teachers lies in their citizenship. A teacher is seen as a native English teacher if he or she holds citizenship in an English-speaking country such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, or Australia. Then he or she needs only a bachelor’s degree in TESOL/English Linguistics. This issue raises some questions. For example, what if an English teacher who is originally from Hong Kong and lived there for many years before permanently migrating to the United Kingdom and acquiring British citizenship while this person speaks English with an entirely Cantonese accent? This teacher is truly Asian biologically and linguistically, but he is truly British legally. Another example is a Filipino teacher who has a bachelor’s degree, has lived in an American English-speaking community, and has graduated from an American university, would he or she be considered eligible to apply for a faculty position at a Vietnamese university to teach English? The answer is no because this person does not hold an “English-native speaking citizenship”. In this sense, qualifications can be compensated by citizenship as well. Citizenship may equate to an accumulation of several degrees but a minus of identity!

In addition, although the demand for native English teachers teaching children in Vietnam has been increasing after the Covid-19 pandemic (*VnExpress*, 2022), not much is known about their teaching adult learners or students. The quest for children to learn authentic and native language models from native English-speaking teachers is high, but not for students or those in employment who cram for tests. In Vietnam, testing, in some ways, degrades nativeness, but the desire for learning to speak as a native speaker upgrades it. The power of nativeness is now bargained. We suspect once the supply of native English teachers is humble, those who meet the requirements may ask for a higher salary. *You get what you pay for*. Foreign and native English teachers can bargain the pay for their values as well! But this bargain is made under the effects of social transformations in Vietnam that result in the demand for increasing the quantity and quality of English speakers for economic growth.

Now, let’s get back to the national foreign language project. The purpose of this part is not to focus on examining the effectiveness of this project (which, indeed, deserves space in another paper, or has it already been thoroughly researched and informed?). Instead, it focuses on pointing out some implications about the expression of nativeness among English teachers in Vietnam. First, while the quantity of those who meet the expected standards of English remains humble, why does MOET tighten the recruitment or entrance

requirements for English-speaking foreign teachers? At this stage, the number of foreign teachers at the tertiary level is managed and recorded by the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs, and that at the school or foreign language center levels is processed and managed by provincial/municipal Departments of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (Government, 2023). The total number of these teachers is not publicly available. We don't actually know for sure the current trends of incoming foreign teachers in Vietnam since there is little evidence about the root of these policy changes. Researchers are also less likely to have access to the policy developers. They can only approach the people who handle the paperwork, but these people may not know the reasons for these changes. The ambivalent approach which is reflective of a division of paperwork management to processing work permits creates some ambiguity for researchers and foreign teachers. The report by British Council (Edmett, Donaghy, & Tysoe, 2021) pointed out that there seemed to be little influence of native or foreign English-speaking teachers on the low scores of Vietnamese people in the English Proficiency Index. It pointed out that there is a lack of a foreign language-speaking environment in Vietnam that limit people from achieving English proficiency. Together with the tightening of the work permit regulations, this may mean that the MOET may want to focus on the quality rather than quantity aspects of foreign English-speaking teachers in Vietnam.

This project might also aim to increase the quality of domestic English teachers, though the targets were hardly reached. Acquiring both education and foreign language proficiency, especially English, is still practiced and is evident in several ways. For example, Nguyen (2021) has pointed out that there were more than 120,000 Vietnamese students studying in 46 countries and territories, although the number of returning graduates is not made public or widely known. These students certainly have possessed or will possess high proficiency in the language in the destination countries. The MOET has also allowed foreign universities to run their campuses in Vietnam and/or joint programs with domestic universities. RMIT is the first foreign-owned university that has campuses in Vietnam. La Trobe University, Swinburne, and many Singaporean schools, to name but a few, have taught their academic degree programs in Vietnam. So far, there have been more than 300 international twinning and advanced programs in Vietnam. At the same time, domestic higher education institutions expand their international relationships with foreign partners to run student and faculty exchange programs (Nguyen, 2021). Allowance for citizens to study abroad and with foreign educational providers at home is a sign that shows the government's desire to let people acquire their language proficiency for study, work, international communication, and professional relationship extensions through nativeness or near-nativeness. Nativeness can now bargain its power, but in its own country or through international collaboration through the Vietnamese Government's dual project in human capacity building.

Conclusion

By no means do we degrade or confront to judge the tremendously moral and educational values that native and non-native English teachers in this paper. Some of them have certainly been our teachers, who made us who we are today: confident in intercultural exchanges and academic communication! We owe them a sincere thank-you that we cannot simply approach and say so! Instead, in this paper, we outlined the interlink of nativeness,

identity, monolingualism, and qualifications so that we could elaborate on the rise and fall in the power of nativeness and non-nativeness. We spoke from the perspectives of English language lecturers and the English department manager when relating to the valuable resources of the native and non-native English colleagues we have worked with so far. To make this long paper short, we summarize the highlights with inferences to the broader fields of language education and foreign language policy planning in the following dot points:

- (Non)nativeness, Identity, monolingual ideologies or bi/multilingualism, and personal and educational qualifications are interlinked. Although speakers or teachers can make up these features, they cannot only be characterized by themselves. Actually, they must be agreed upon and recognized by communities, students, and legal regulations. On the one hand, the making up of these features is a personal matter. On the other, this interlink is changed constantly, becoming volatile and fragile under socio-political transformations and social prejudices.
- This interlink can allow monolingual ideologies to encounter both challenges and possibilities to manifest themselves with some bargaining power. In this sense, the imperialism of nativeness may be weakened and strengthened at the same time. Choosing an English teaching career at home or abroad is a personal choice that is managed by socioeconomic development strategies and changing legal conditions. It is not an apolitical activity. It is a personal-social sphere that involves negotiations of power based on the interlinks of personal (non)nativeness, qualifications, and mono/bilingualism to social prejudice, legality, and social transformations.
- The bargaining power in the interlink between (non)nativeness, identity, mono/bilingualism, and qualifications is often negotiated by the matches between individual choice and the regimes of foreign language entrepreneurship and politics. Citizenship can be used as a tool for some kinds of foreign English teachers to bargain for their lack of necessary qualifications and their (confusing) identity.

Recommendations

Let's now move on to some recommendations which are related to the future of nativeness and non-nativeness, at least in Vietnam's context: foreign language planning. Albeit a bit too outdated, Cooper's (1989) framework for language planning policies has still been valid as we need to consider the influences of the actors involved in the policy planning processes on specific groups of people's behaviors in certain circumstances. Language policies must be reviewed and amended as conditions may change over time. Language reform must remain national identity and, in some ways, nationalism (Kharis *et al.*, 2020) under the effects of social change (Cooper, 1989) that happens on the national and international scales. Practice, trust, and management must go hand in hand in the foreign language policy process (Spolsky, 2021). Any changes in the recruitment process for foreign English teachers must be informed internationally and nationally before an employer may choose a person who does not meet the qualification requirements, or a potential candidate may feel upset when being sacked upon the employer's acceptance. The identity of a teacher may count, but the quality of his or her teaching delivery,

which is embodied in his or her devotion to working in a foreign country and expressed in his or her qualifications matters more. Therefore, the screening of documentation is important at the legal scale, but the communication or an interview between an employer and a foreign teacher at an organic level counts as well.

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